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**Shifting Sands:
Language and Identity in North American
Indigenous Communities**

In this brief essay it is my intent to address some of the key issues involving language and identity in North American indigenous communities. For this purpose I will employ the term 'North American indigenous communities' to refer to groups generally known in the United States of America as 'Native Americans' (excluding, however, Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders) and in Canada as 'First Nations'. Although ways will be discussed in which indigenous attitudes towards language and identity have been changing in the entire region over the last hundred years, the primary examples will be taken from the Algonquian area, involving communities from Northeast Canada (Cree) to Northern Mexico (Kickapoo). For many illustrative examples of these trends I will draw on my fieldwork (Whittaker 1996) among the Sauk communities of Central Oklahoma and the Nebraska-Kansas border area, two groups officially known as the Sac & Fox Nation of Oklahoma and the Missouri.

1. The crisis

Michael Krauss (1998: 11) has predicted that almost all – “all but 20” – indigenous languages will be extinct by the year 2060. If this is an accurate prediction, and the overall consensus among scholars is that it is, then it would, indeed, be difficult to view this as anything short of a crisis. Why a crisis? Admittedly, there have been, and still are, voices (in particular among politicians and geolinguists) taking the position that language replacement is a natural – even healthy – development and expressing perplexity over those who, decrying it as a grievous loss of linguistic and cultural patrimony, raise alarm and urge concerted action to counter the downhill trend. Nevertheless, regardless of the stance taken on this issue, there can be no denial that

language is widely seen in indigenous communities as a prime vehicle of culture and identity, if not the consummate representative of both. Thus, the impending loss of this bearer, or at least badge, of culture and identity is understandably viewed with consternation by many North American societies, who fear repercussions for their future existence as autonomous entities.

To take one example: While the Sauk as a whole regard their language as the bearer of their culture and the guarantor of their separate identity, many traditionalists also view it as the one true vehicle of their belief systems, without which, for example, their religion ('The Traditional Way', as opposed to 'The Peyote Way' of the Native American Church, and 'The Way of the Cross', or Christianity, all three of which are represented in Sauk society) would be unthinkable. As clan chiefs, the traditional religious leaders, explain it, Sauk who cannot understand their own language and who cannot speak to the numinous manitous in the language the Great Manitou gave them will not be able to find their way after death and will, thus, be lost souls. The fact that the last fluent speaker of Sauk (a Christian) died in 2004 only serves to underscore the gravity of the situation in the eyes of Sauk traditionalists. Even those Sauk (semi-speakers and non-speakers alike) who are members of the Native American and Christian churches agree in seeing the imminent loss of their indigenous language as a crisis for the cultural, if not social and political, identity of the community.

Despite the foreseeable loss of their language, and despite the dogged, but largely fruitless, attempts by individuals in the Sauk community to generate interest in language documentation and in language classes, which have been offered on and off since the 1970s, the trend continued unabated to its ultimate conclusion. In this respect it can be seen that the generally acknowledged vital importance of an indigenous language to the identity of a community need have no relationship to the amount of effort individuals and the community as a whole are willing to invest in salvaging it (that is, in recording it for posterity), let alone in restoring it as a language of the community.

2. Causes of the crisis

How did it get to this point? There were three primary factors which, combined, had devastating repercussions for indigenous language and identity. Firstly, the repressive educational policy in force in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Secondly, economic necessities that compelled the younger generation to leave their communities in their search for work. And thirdly, the draw of the dominant society's popular culture, particularly in the decades following World War II.

2.1 Educational policy

An immediate and long-term cause of the decline was the educational policy, or better, policies, employed by a majority of government and church schools in dealing with indigenous students into the early 20th century. These highly effective policies, put into practice both at boarding and day schools, involved in their mildest form the public humiliation of children caught speaking their indigenous language, even on the playground. In their severest form they coupled humiliation with corporal punishment. Sauk children, for example, caught 'speaking Indian' were often punished for such infractions by being stood in the corner of the classroom, beaten, or subjected to such practices as having lye soap twisted into their teeth.

At the same time classes inculcated, with varying degrees of success, a perception of 'Indian' language and culture as primitive and barbaric (in contrast to the positive values of European 'civilization' in its North American manifestation). Years of such abuse convinced many Sauk that it would be better to spare their own children a similar fate. Their children were often not taught Sauk at all. Others felt it would be better to wait until the children were old enough to appreciate Sauk traditions and to decide for themselves. Invariably, these strategies presaged the death-knell of the language, at least for their own immediate descendants.

It was not just the perceptible harshness of the educational system that had an adverse effect on the linguistic proficiency and sense of identity of indigenous children. Since children from one community frequently found themselves, especially at boarding school, thrown together for years at a time with children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities sharing little or nothing with their own,

their opportunities for speaking their own language and preserving their sense of community identity were severely restricted. Such extreme deprivation led inexorably in some cases to suicide.

2.2 Economic concerns

The economic collapse during the period of the Depression forced many young members of already impoverished indigenous communities to seek work away from home. Acceptance in jobs (e.g. in oil drilling, in construction work, and in the army) brought new-found respect not usually experienced in contact with the communities surrounding their own. This convinced some of the positive benefits of 'being civilized' and influenced their attitude towards the indigenous traditions and values that tended to separate them from their employers and peers. The decision not to pass on their native language to their children was, thus, both a conscious one guided by a concern for their children's future and an unconscious one necessitated by their own perceived loss of fluency and ease of communication in the language. Even among those who retained a positive attitude towards their language and identity, the effects of long-term separation from their home community on their ability to speak their native language were not infrequently devastating.

Increased mobility beyond the bounds of their own indigenous communities brought job-seekers not only into more intimate contact with the dominant Euro-American society, but also into increasing exchanges with members of other minority groups, especially Blacks and Hispanics. The greater contact with outside groups that was brought upon initially by economic necessity led in time to ever more frequent intermarriage with members of such communities. This in turn was a further factor influencing parents' adoption of English as the language to be spoken in the resulting mixed-ethnic family.

Intermarriage introduced conflicting perspectives on language and language teaching not only into mixed-ethnic families involving indigenous and non-indigenous partners. Intermarriage among members of different indigenous communities has had similar repercussions on language attitudes and on the (oft unconscious) choice of language for the family. In one typical instance, a Sauk-Kickapoo family used English at home. Their son learned neither Sauk nor Kickapoo from his

parents, although his grandmother made a policy of speaking to him in Sauk when he stayed with her. She was, however, the only person to do so. While he understood her perfectly well, he usually answered her in English, the only language reinforced at home, at play, and in school.

Over the last hundred years contact among indigenous communities has grown ever stronger. At the cultural level this has been facilitated by the growth of the powwow system, the cycle of community festivities that draws members of diverse indigenous communities together for annual celebrations centred on dancing. During these festivities there is much exchange of news and ideas, and much opportunity for discussion of attitudes to traditional culture as well as of reaction to recent developments affecting indigenous communities. The gradual leveling effect of Panindianism, an outgrowth both of this intercommunity contact and of a reaction and adaptation to the dominant society's perceptions and expectations of 'Indian' culture, has been a powerful additional factor in eroding community-specific cultural and linguistic features while moulding increasingly uniform attitudes towards language and identity. Some people spend several months traveling the powwow circuit, moving from one community's powwow to the next. Their own attitudes to language and identity are characteristically the result of this subtle, ongoing process of erosion and fusion.

The economic doldrums in which many indigenous communities have long floundered have been alleviated in varying degree by the introduction of bingo halls and casinos. Work in halls and casinos has often brought unaccustomed economic security, both for the community as a whole and for the individual member of the society. The enormous financial impact of these institutions on the first communities to introduce them quickly persuaded others to follow their example, and the trend continues unabated today. While the short-term effects of this monetary infusion have struck many as beneficial to the community, the negative aspects are not lost on its more traditionally-minded members, who discern a concordant rise in drug and alcohol abuse and a tendency for the young to orient themselves increasingly towards the language and values of the dominant society represented by these institutions, a tendency exacerbated by the constant flow of

non-indigenous job-seekers and, in particular, gambling recreationists into the community.

2.3 The draw of popular culture

The allure of the mass media – first, radio, then television, now video and computer – has influenced indigenous attitudes towards language and identity in a number of ways. On the one hand, the easy affordability and accessibility of radios and television sets has meant that most families and individuals acquire them. Often, televisions are left on the whole day while family members go about their daily lives. They are frequently left running, sometimes even at high volume levels, when visitors are present and engaged in conversation. Since the language of the North American mass media is European (English, French, Spanish) and its culture Euro-American, this incessant linguistic and visual bombardment has a powerful effect in shaping not only the language habits and choice of children but also their culture of orientation with its ever-changing fads and fashions. Indigenous communities have their own print and, occasionally, broadcast media, but these employ, as a rule, a European language as the standard for communication, relegating indigenous-language material, where admitted at all, to the side-lines of newspapers and to special slots in radio programming. These have little or no impact on the young, serving in general as a vehicle for communication among members of the older generation (Miller 1996).

3. Consequences of the crisis

The effect of these factors on attitudes towards language and identity has been considerable. Among the more significant developments are: firstly, a widespread loss or rejection of indigenous language skills and values; secondly, a largely apathetic reaction on the community level to the inroads of English and French on the one hand and of pop culture on the other; and thirdly, a general reluctance to promote and further develop traditional culture (as opposed to moral values) beyond a superficial or folkloristic level. Despite the often considerable efforts of individuals in indigenous communities to revive an interest in language knowledge and use, energetic and concerted support from the communities as a whole and from their administrations is fre-

quently sporadic and rarely directed towards developing strategies to achieve a stable bilingualism in which the entire community participates. Thus, the erosion of the cultural features that distinguish one indigenous community from the next continues by and large unabated. This blurring of separate identities has, however, been conducive to the fostering of a new continental Panindian identity that was originally limited to the North American heartland but is swiftly spreading to all corners of the Americas. In this identity indigenous languages play at best a subordinate role.

It goes without saying that attitudes towards indigenous languages and language have been shifting over the course of the last half-century in response to the deepening crisis. Indigenous languages are no longer a salient feature in the culture of most communities and yet language still has a powerful symbolic value that is expressed in a number of ways indicative of these shifts. Some of these will be discussed below.

4. What's in a name?

The epithet 'Indian,' originally applied by Europeans to all indigenous peoples of the Americas south of the Arctic, has long been used, albeit in varying degree, by indigenous Americans as a neutral identifying label for themselves. The latter often reject the term 'Native American', not least because the United States government uses it to include Hawaiians, a policy that expands the number of groups eligible to apply for federal grants available to indigenous Americans. Frequently, indigenous Americans will describe themselves first as 'Indian' and only specify their 'tribal affiliation' when asked or pressed for it.

Linguistic identity, too, is often expressed in very general terms, as in the following statements made by Sauk elders: "I pray in Indian"; "I never did learn to write Indian"; and "I only speak Indian to my brother". The use of an indigenous language – any indigenous language – can have the effect of bestowing a degree of authenticity, of 'Indianness', to the person or event associated with it. The Sauk Powwow, an annual event held in English that takes place at the end of the first week in July, is traditionally opened with a prayer offered by an elder from the community. In the past, this has customarily been

phrased in Sauk, but in recent years, due to the ever declining numbers of speakers and semi-speakers able to do so, English has begun to alternate with it. The opening prayer, regardless of which religion it pertains to, was once intimately associated with the indigenous language but has now shifted its association to the elder offering it, whose 'Indianness', whether he be a Sauk or, as sometimes happens, a guest from another indigenous community, bestows the desired authenticity on the event.

Hollywood has tended increasingly in recent decades to use language as an instrument bestowing authenticity on the indigenous person or community portrayed. The beginning of this trend appears to be connected with the John Ford film, "Cheyenne Autumn" (1964), one of the first to depict indigenous peoples sympathetically. In the film speakers of Navajo, a Na-Dene language, are cast as Cheyenne fleeing from the U.S. army in the late 19th century. The actors were not given lines to read in Cheyenne, an unrelated Algonquian language, but instead were permitted to speak in Navajo. Taking advantage of the ignorance of their employer, the actors in one tense scene apparently speculated freely and unflatteringly on the size of the genitals of their White counterpart. Needless to say, the film enjoys an unheard-of popularity in Navajo country to this day.

The first commercial film I am aware of that is spoken entirely in an indigenous language was "Windwalker" (1980), a tale of two Cheyenne brothers in the pre-reservation period. The dialogue is indeed in Cheyenne (and a little Crow), even though the leading actor was English, but the blurb describing the film on the video jacket states vaguely: "in Native American". In "Clearcut" (1992) the Oneida actor Graham Greene is cast as an indigenous militant in eastern Canada, where Algonquian and Iroquoian languages are spoken. In the only scene in which he uses an indigenous language he prays in Lakota, a Siouan language not spoken in Canada but the one he famously used in "Dances with Wolves" (1990), where he portrayed a Lakota on the 19th-century Great Plains. Lakota has become 'Indian' language par excellence in modern North America and Europe, and Graham Greene is viewed as the epitome of 'Indianness'. Thus, it seems only natural that he speak Lakota when he portrays an indigenous figure.

A more unfortunate development is the experience some communities and educators report with regard to "The Disney Company",

which became famous for its feature-length animated films, such as the classic "Bambi" (1942), a tale of animals deep in the North American forests. Given its compatibility with many indigenous tales and themes, one Arapaho educator, Stephen Greymorning, approached Disney with a request to have the film dubbed in Arapaho as part of a program aimed at drawing Arapaho children to their ancestral language, which has been on a steady decline in recent decades. Disney agreed, and the Arapaho version (released in 1994) organized by Greymorning has been a great success in the community. Sadly, other indigenous communities have failed to persuade Disney to permit similar projects for their languages.

With the decline of traditional language and culture has come what could be called the 'last of his tribe' phenomenon, a variant of which is the 'last speaker' phenomenon. James Fenimore Cooper's novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), is an early example reflecting this concept of the 'vanishing race'. Status is attached to individuals described in these terms. Theodora Kroeber's 1964 memoir, *Ishi: Last of His Tribe*, and the recent film version (1992) based on it illustrate how Ishi, a Californian Yahi, had celebrity thrust upon him as a result of the fact that he was perceived and portrayed as being 'the last wild Indian'. An elder in the Sauk community on the Nebraska-Kansas border was understandably proud of his status in the mid-1990s as the 'last speaker of Sauk', although the language had in fact ceased to be spoken there around mid-century and he privately admitted that the one text he carried with him was actually a prayer in another indigenous language that he had attempted to write down phonetically at a powwow. Members of indigenous communities who are among the last individuals with knowledge of their ancestral language are often referred to as speakers even if they are only able to recall a few phrases and a modicum of vocabulary. A sadder development is the casual application of the sobriquets 'speaker' and even 'last speaker' to linguists working with endangered languages. More troubling, however, is a tendency for some academics to yield to the temptation of describing themselves in such flattering or poignant terms.

The last fluent speakers in a community are frequently among those most concerned about the fate of the language and most willing to help efforts to save it. Some Sauk elders who in earlier years had no interest in divulging their linguistic and cultural knowledge to an out-

sider changed their mind when they realized that the language would die undocumented and thus would be irrevocably lost to future generations. Conversely, as fluent speakers passed away, some semi-speakers began to recognize the growing value of their limited knowledge and attach a premium to it. In the words of one such elder, who was reluctant to share what he knew with others: "Your knowledge is your treasure."

5. Enshrining language and script

A further shift in attitudes can be seen with regard to the nature of language itself. In many communities language is seen as one of the primary cultural gifts granted to mankind by a creator or culture hero. Nevertheless, its nature has not been generally regarded as intrinsically sacred or subject to taboo regulation. With the increasing rarity of language knowledge in a community, however, there has been a trend towards what I call the sacralization of language. In the early 20th century Sauk was a language used for letters, notes, and even for correspondence by postcard with relatives and friends outside of the community, often as far away as Iowa and Illinois. There was no taboo associated with setting it in writing for all to see. Today, by contrast, there are some prominent Sauk who condemn the recording of the language, claiming that its intrinsic sacredness forbids such profane acts. The taboo is taken to include all forms of recording, but explicitly forbids writing and taping. Supporters of this position go so far as to say that they would prefer to see the language die than be recorded.

In some communities writing systems are part and parcel of the cultural identity, all the more so where its form or use appears exotic to the outsider. The Cherokee syllabary still figures as a salient characteristic of the culture even though it is no longer prevalent in daily life. The Canada Inuit syllabary, based on a geometric Cree model designed by a missionary in the 19th century, is felt by its users today to be 'more Eskimo' than the Latin alphabet. Japanese influence in the arrangement of signs in artists' name seals has not diminished the Inuit character of the script but rather enhanced its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the Western systems dominant in the country. The resurrection and adoption of the Maya hieroglyphic system for certain purposes by

Maya intellectuals in Guatemala can be understood both as a reestablishment of links to their cultural past and as a declaration of independence from Western 'cultural imperialism'.

Orthography, too, is an element of visible culture increasingly drawn into the fray when competing perspectives on cultural and linguistic identity are debated. This development is a natural outcome of plans to create language programs in an effort to stem the European-language tide threatening to overwhelm indigenous communities.

When Oklahoma introduced a heavily contested law in 1990 (House Bill 1017) that finally granted indigenous communities the right to develop their own language programs for schools, they were initially given neither state funds nor free access to educators to aid them in development. Furthermore, they were required to complete their course designs, including the implementation of a standard orthography, and to train their own language instructors within a period of two years or lose their right to submit such programs for consideration. Even those communities which, against all odds, succeeded in developing a language program received no guarantee that schools in their district or districts would accept them. Consequently, relatively few indigenous communities have managed so far to set up viable programs.

Orthography is a bone of contention for many. Traditionalists often – quite understandably – resist an orthographic system designed by outsiders, whether they be linguists or not, if a familiar system, however rudimentary, already exists. Spelling conventions in use for decades or longer, even if incomplete and inconsistent, are not easily abandoned or reformed. Although most of these conventions evolved from the practice of non-indigenous persons, such as government officials, interpreters, missionaries, reporters and educators, over time they acquired the status of tradition. With the decline in language knowledge and usage in a community, however, comes a commensurate decline in orthographic proficiency. Variant practices deriving from uncertainty about correct forms may eventually compete with each other in an unsystematic way and become hallowed by tradition. Members of communities with such competing orthographic conventions or practices find it often difficult to adopt a single uniform standard, even if it is based on the existing patterns. And this in turn im-

pedes the introduction of such a generally accepted standard for schools and the media.

An example of this quandary is the situation in the Sauk community of Central Oklahoma. The traditional writing system, one shared for the most part by the Meskwaki (also Mesquakie, Fox) of Iowa, who speak a very closely related language, is based on the Latin alphabet. It includes no diacritics and no special characters. The system, often (but inaccurately) referred to as a syllabary, separates a word syllabically into spaced sequences of consonant + vowel, ignoring the representation of vowel length and preconsonantal aspiration. Its conventions, which derive from the mixed influence of French and English, evolved in the 19th century. Some of the original letter forms had altered their shape significantly by the end of the same century. Thus, an original *ch*, deriving from French for the equivalent phoneme, evolved first by reduction into *cl*, the form retained by the Sauk into the 3rd quarter of the 20th century, but at an early date developed further by fusion into *d*, the variant form employed traditionally by the Meskwaki. Likewise, an original cursive *p*, for the equivalent phoneme in French and English, evolved into the letter *l* among both the Sauk and the Meskwaki, a transformation made tolerable by the fact that a phoneme /l/ no longer exists in these languages. These conventions posed no difficulty to indigenous writers in the early 20th century, when literacy in the system was high and the majority of community members were fluent speakers.

Among the Sauk of Oklahoma today, where there are no more speakers capable of writing connected sentences in the language, a number of competing variations on this system have developed for rendering words and names, serving to confuse and divide not only would-be learners but also elders whose command of the system has slipped. Language classes offered by members of the Sauk community from the 1970s on frequently spent many sessions going over and reciting the 'syllabary' and attempting to read aloud Sauk words and phrases, many of them misspelled, from a primer. Given such stumbling blocks, several of the last fluent speakers had grown accustomed over the years to writing Sauk with conventions based on English, replacing eccentric forms such as *cl* and *l* by their English counterparts *sh* and *p*. At the recommendation of several elders, all of whom were among the last fluent speakers, and despite my realization that

I was embarking on treacherous waters, I drew up in my capacity as language advisor to the Sauk a modified system that incorporated the most common simplifications in use in the community into a consistent pattern understandable to speakers of English, the primary, if not only, language of all Sauk today. This system, adopted by the Business Committees of the Sac & Fox Nation of Oklahoma and the Missouri as the official orthography for Sauk in 1995, was for the most part positively received, but met with resistance among some semi- and non-speakers who looked on the traditional orthography (in its many variants) as God-given and thus immutable. Others felt that the very arcaneness of the traditional system, the very fact that only a select few insiders could wield it skillfully, was what makes it so important to Sauk identity – it serves to distinguish the Sauk from all others. In both cases, it is the secret or esoteric knowledge required that makes the traditional orthography appealing to some as an element of identity.

Throughout the Americas competing orthographies have fought on a battleground on which the contending parties have sometimes been solely academics, sometimes members of indigenous communities, and sometimes a mix of both. The raging debate in Mayanist circles as to which of two or more orthographies should be employed is a case in point. Many Maya intellectuals regard the orthography officially adopted for the Maya languages of Guatemala in 1988 as an important badge of a resurgent Maya identity freed from the shackles of Colonial, Western and academic dictates and unimpeded by national borders (this despite the fact that the new orthography is itself a Western creation, essentially designed and strongly promoted by a professional linguist from the U.S.). Those who fail to use it are seen as rejecting or ignoring this new-found identity. Some go so far as to promulgate the adoption of the Maya conventions even for the representation of well-known non-Maya ethnic labels and place names when cited in a European language.

6. Once and future languages

An unwillingness to accept the fate looming over indigenous languages is reflected in the substitution of the term ‘dormant’ for ‘dead’ in reference to a language whose last native speaker has died. This

terminological shift or change of paradigms is now observable not only in indigenous communities but also in the outside world, among academics, educators, politicians and the media. Nowadays, indigenous communities are increasingly aware of the discourse in academic publications and the popular media concerning their languages and culture. In part this is due to the fact that members of such communities with a tertiary education encounter and participate in this discourse in the context of their training and professional work. Although this is a healthy development, it can cause sensitive issues to be smoothed over with euphemisms.

The use of the adjective 'dormant' is one example of this trend. Languages, of course, are not organic beings; thus, they neither die nor fall into what Germans call a 'Dornröschenschlaf', a hibernation-like or comatose state (named after Sleeping Beauty) of expectant inactivity. Nor are they volcanoes, waiting to erupt once more onto the cultural plain. They are said to die when the last speaker dies. But even this is an imprecise equation. When does the last speaker die? When the last person dies who has the ability to speak the language fluently (that is, who is capable of talking on any subject without major difficulty)? Since such a 'last speaker' would have had no one left to speak with in the language, can he or she be called a last speaker at all?

Describing a tongue as 'dormant' allows one the luxury of entertaining the hope of a reawakening, of a language revival at some future point. In practice this is rare, exceedingly rare. The revival of Hebrew for the modern state of Israel is the classic example. One can argue that Hebrew is not the sole exception that it appears to be, since there have always been many Jews with the ability to read the language fluently (thus, a passive fluency, but a fluency nonetheless). Attempts of this nature are fraught with considerable and often insurmountable difficulty. Languages that are not yet dead – that is, that still have native speakers – can be revived with difficulty and the concerted long-term efforts of the community. Immersion programs, such as those currently underway in Maori and Hawaiian communities, can be successful, but they require the help of fluent speakers who work and play with the young exclusively in the target language. A 'dormant' language, however, does not have a pool of speakers to draw on. Its revival is, thus, dependant on individuals who have learned it

as a second language or who have only a partial native command of the language. The resultant 'revived' language would arguably be a somewhat different language from the one it is emulating.

A test case for language revival is the ongoing Miami-Illinois experiment in Oklahoma. The Miami-Illinois language died – or, if one prefers, became 'dormant' – in the 1980s. David Costa, a young Algonquianist and the leading specialist today on the language, has been helping Daryl Baldwin, a member of the Miami community and an educator, to recreate it, to the extent that this is possible given the incomplete documentation of the language before its demise. Baldwin, his wife and four children have been using the language as a family language, in an attempt to build a viable core community for the future. Time will tell whether they are successful in this, and other indigenous communities are watching with great interest.

For further information on present trends, I recommend as the best starting point the *SSILA Newsletter* of the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas, Arcata, California (see <www.ssila.org>).

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